

An Education of Moments

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INTRODUCTION

Finding Meaning

I recently wrote a review of *Helping College Student Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making* by Nash and Murray (2010), a wonderful book that invites university instructors, as well as administrators and academic advisors, to support students in making meaning and finding their place in a complex and often confusing world. One person who reviewed my article prior to publication included among his comments a question. He asked how someone teaching English as a foreign language in Japan might employ the concepts Nash and Murray present. In a way, I'd been avoiding this question. While reading the book, I felt somewhat envious of university professors who taught courses devoted to the "philosophy of meaning-making" (p. 91).

Although I wouldn't be teaching such courses, meaning-making was important to me, and I tried, with varying degrees of conscious awareness, to bring it into my work with university students. I felt encouraged when reading about a student whose most significant explorations of self and existence occurred in a biology class. After all, meaning-making is what we are all doing, regardless of our roles in the world, whether we are aware of it or not. "Could it be, therefore, that what is human to all of us is our universal quest for meaning and purpose?" (p. xxx) After writing about the book and taking my reviewer's comments on board, I was left to ponder what I, a language teacher, could do to pursue the aim of supporting young people as they find out who they want to be and what is important to them.

The following from Nash and Murray is an invitation, both exciting and daunting.

Knowing that, in the end, each of us is called to make meaning, all of us on

campus need to continually ask the following questions: how can we assist students to find the most effective ways to make the wisest choices in their own, and others', best interests? How can we help young people find their own best wisdom paths? How can we encourage them to use their personal freedoms to become interdependent agents in the world, acting always with prudence, compassion and responsibility toward others? (p. 36)

Daunting, yes. But what could be more important?

In this essay, I explore how my own meaning-making experiences have made me the teacher I am. These experiences did not arrive in the form of a single university course; rather, my most significant, formative experiences comprise a handful of moments. Some of these happened in the classroom; others occurred elsewhere. In some, I'm in the role of teacher, while in others, I'm the student. In one of these, I'm neither. Like a constellation stretched over time and place, these moments have cohered into something. But what? Sometimes I think of it as the root system of my teaching philosophy. These stories tend to bubble up when I revisit the formal statement of my philosophy of education. These moments are the annotations, the footnotes, the underpinnings of my clearest, most concise statement on education: *Identify the purpose. Respect the student. Trust the process.* This is the essence of my teaching practice, a statement I've refined over the years. It exists as a single page, but it's bursting with moments that now inform what I do in the classroom.

A Few Words about the Writing Process

As a way of encouraging students to dig deep and take risks in their writing, I let them know that the word *essay* has its roots in the French word, *essayer*, for “to try” or “to attempt.” I've tried, in writing this essay, to keep my own advice in mind, remembering to allow the story to unfold rather than filling in the prose of a picture whose outlines are already formed. In short: I wasn't sure what I was going to express in this essay, but I knew there was value in the process.

In the end, the essay seemed to find its own form; I just followed the clues. There are six vignettes, in which I describe a moment of significant meaning-making. These have fallen in groups — three pairs that illustrate the three points of my

philosophy of education. I've chosen excerpts from Nash and Murray to lend further support. At the end of each section, I include a short statement of how I hope to bring these significant moments into the classroom.

IDENTIFY THE PURPOSE

Soccer Without the Ball

I once taught a grammar course at a language school. Because of its focus on grammar and not, for instance, on speaking, I recall feeling that I could not be considered a failure if my lessons weren't dynamic and exciting. I've always felt the sting of a class that didn't go well. In the past, if the students weren't smiling at least some of the time, I'd feel guilty for not planning more carefully, or I'd tell myself I shouldn't be a teacher. However, in this grammar class, I felt liberated from any sense that my classes should be something to look forward to. Together, we'd plow through the dry material; we were all in it together.

In the middle of a lesson on some grammar point or other, a Brazilian student threw up his hands and said, "This is like playing soccer without the ball." He couldn't have chosen a more apt metaphor. There was no point in what we were doing — no life. We were chasing air. Imagine trying to convey how thrilling the game of soccer is using spoken language and a whiteboard. Why not grab a ball and kick it around a bit?

Unfortunately, too often in the academy, we insist that our students pursue and achieve a whole host of academic and career purposes without first helping them to formulate systems of meanings to inform these purposes. (p.xx)

Here Nash and Murray are commenting on the big picture. We educators can apply this to what we do on a smaller scale, too: if grammar isn't in the service of meaning, what is it good for?

Student Learning

One of my graduate school professors asked us a particular question when we had lost sight of our purpose or had become mired in unimportant details during classroom discussions: "What does it have to do with student learning?" One of the

things I like about this question is its scalability. It's as useful a question to pose when planning a specific activity for a lesson as it is to thinking about helping students prepare to study abroad or how to process and integrate the study-abroad experience after they've returned.

In a certain sense, being an educator is simple, and this question — *What does it have to do with student learning?* — is at the heart of that simplicity. In other words, we educators should help our students learn. This is simple. I'm not naive, however, and I know that from this simple statement, an infinity of complexities arise, relating to, to name just a few, what to teach; how to teach; how to foster motivation for both students and teachers; how to assess students' work meaningfully; how to help students transition effectively to life after graduation. The list goes on, and yet, for each of these, *What does it have to do with student learning?* is an appropriate starting point and focusing tool.

In the classroom, I will remember to bring the ball, a link to our real lives, and I will keep the students' experience in clear focus as I plan and teach classes.

RESPECT THE STUDENT

Talented and Gifted

When I was in elementary school, my classmates and I were tested to see if we would be eligible to participate in the talented-and-gifted, or "TAG," program. We all knew the purpose of the test. Imagine saying to a child, "We're going to give you some tests that will tell us whether or not you are a gifted and talented person." Then imagine telling that same child, "Well, the results are in, and it looks like you're neither talented nor gifted." No one used these words, of course, but this is precisely the message that was communicated by the process. Condensed like this into lines of dialogue, does it seem cold, mean spirited, disempowering, cruel? At the time, I didn't think so, but now when I reflect on this as an adult, as a parent and as an educator I feel angry and sad.

I included this story in a paper as a graduate student. My professor commented that — and I must paraphrase here — education is not the purpose of school; enculturation is. I'm still processing his comment. It's easy to assume that education

is the purpose of school, but it's important to dig a bit deeper. What is education anyway? Does it, by definition, include helping people discover and develop their strengths and gifts, find meaning in an impossibly complex world, develop critical thinking skills, and learn about the way things work? Or is education about creating an obedient workforce that knows how to follow rules and schedules, to obey authority, and to endure tedium? John Taylor Gatto (2002), a teacher of 26 years, had a realization that caused him to question the nature and aims of compulsory education in the United States. He posed this question: "Was it possible I had been hired not to enlarge children's power, but to diminish it?" (p. xxxiii)

To be very clear: I know that I was not hired to diminish the power of my students. But I also know that every choice I make as a teacher carries a multitude of impacts and meanings — some empowering, some disempowering. For instance, what are the immediate and lasting impacts of calling on a student to answer a question in front of a class of twenty-five students? What if she knows the answer? What if she doesn't know the answer? What if she gives an incorrect answer? What if the classroom culture is such that saying "I'm not sure" is regarded by the teacher and students as a perfectly good response to a question? I've been the teacher in all of these situations, and some of them seem to empower students while others do not.

Everything I do during class conveys some message. What do I want to say with my choice of textbooks, with my speaking style, with my written comments? Is my message one of empowerment? Is it overtly or covertly disempowering? Or worse, perhaps, are my messages conflicted?

How Are You Smart?

It is this practice of implicitly telling children they are not talented, gifted, or smart that brings me to the next moment in this constellation. Somehow, I came across an idea about teaching that instantly rang true: "As educators, the question to ask is not 'How smart are you?' but 'How are you smart?'" I don't know how old I was when I heard this, but it was before I started teaching — even before I'd considered becoming a teacher. This notion struck me as essential to teaching that would be respectful of students, each with different life experiences, beliefs, strengths and fears. If implemented effectively, this is the perfect alternative to the way TAG testing was conducted at my elementary school. What if, instead of asking

whether we were talented and gifted as a yes-no question, we'd been told, "We'd like to help you find your talents and your gifts."?

Much later, I would learn that *How are you smart?* is from Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, to which Nash and Murray also refer:

We contend that meaning-making requires, at the very least, an acknowledgement by educators that students learn in different ways, and that one type of intelligence is not necessarily superior to another. The implication for all of us in higher education is that we need to look for ways to link more effectively *what* we do to *how* students learn. (p. 96)

I appreciate their use of "at the very least," for once an educator makes this acknowledgement, every class period and every moment spent preparing lessons provides another opportunity to ask how our students are smart.

In the classroom, I will respect the student by monitoring the message I am conveying, ensuring I acknowledge their innate intelligence, and by modeling respect for others and self in the words I choose and in the way I conduct myself.

TRUST THE PROCESS

Don't Erase Your Tracks Completely

This story is from a university art class with an excellent teacher. I would be working on a drawing, frustrated that it didn't match the subject. The instructor would look at my work and with one or two expert strokes, she'd let me know that my drawing was salvageable. More than that. It was real, honest and worthy of a place in the world. On one occasion, I eagerly began erasing everything that did not align with the corrected version of the subject of the drawing. She told me to never fully erase my tracks. I felt I'd been released from some rigid code. I was free to explore; to undo; to redo and to see where I would wind up in the end. I began to see that evidence of the creative process gave my drawings a shimmering, organic quality, a sort of motion frozen on the page.

Her encouragement has gone well beyond the art studio. I carry it with me now.

It's a reminder that everything is a process, and there are processes within larger processes: this lesson; this course; this school year; my career; my life. All of these shimmer with the missteps of learning, and all of it is worthy of a place in this world. This helps me when I feel a class isn't going well. I can stay with it. I can adjust. I can add another line — a bold one. More than salvageable, if we stay with the project, we may be surprised by its beauty when we take a step back from it.

Don't give in to the periodic brokenness that comes out of teaching: boredom, self-criticism, uncertainty physical and mental fatigue, unrealistic expectations, restlessness, self-doubt. In this brokenness, true joy and freedom are waiting to be born. All it takes is shouting a courageous "yes" to live, to love, and to learn; and to resist the suicidal lure of "no." Is there really any other alternative, short of giving in and giving up? (p. 235)

Knowing the Whole Story

Roger Ebert, in his review of Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* wrote: "If you knew the whole story in this world, there'd be a lot less to be angry about." I've held this notion somewhere in my awareness for years — either as a specific sentence in sharp focus, or as a soft whisper in the background. *Short Cuts* follows several characters whose lives intersect at certain significant moments. We, the omniscient audience, stand above the labyrinth, while the characters navigate the twists and blind corners. We observe a bereaved character's rage and understand why she directs it at another, yet, at the same time, we know this rage is unjustified, for the target is innocent. She did not know the whole story.

When I encounter behavior in a student that seems disrespectful (talking loudly at an inappropriate time; sending text messages) or dishonest (plagiarizing an Internet source; copying another student's work), I try to remind myself that I'll never — could never — know the full story of this student's life. The worst choice would be to take it personally and react with anger. The best choice, I believe, is to recall Ebert's wise words, to acknowledge the student's behavior without judgement as a way of letting her or him see it more clearly. Nash and Murray present this succinctly:

By harping on the mistake, we reinforce their need for self-defense. But if,

instead, we point toward the opportunity for them to demonstrate character, we communicate a belief in the students' basic integrity and an expectation that they will rise to the moral challenges they face. (p. 194)

I wasn't sure where this piece best fit. At first, it seemed most at home under *Respect the Student*. I wanted symmetry, however, so I looked to *Trust the Process*, as placing the story here would yield an appealing trio of pairs. Then I began to see that the trust described here is one that I place in the very process that puts me in contact with the students who find their way into my class. Moreover, I'm trusting their personal development and evolution. This means that I cannot write someone off as being... and here we can complete the sentence with any negative characterization: selfish, unintelligent, weird — whatever it might be. I've made assumptions based on very little information about why someone might be disruptive, disrespectful, or inattentive, and I've been wrong.

In the classroom, I will trust the process of all that is unfinished. I will acknowledge missteps as needed steps in the project at hand, be it a semester-long class or a challenging situation with a student.

Conclusion

Nash and Murray write about Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. If I can trust my memory, I suspected they would; I felt it coming.

Rilke:

...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

In writing about meaning-making, I have blurred the boundary between myself as a teacher and as a student. In my introduction, I quoted Nash and Murray's

question about how we might help young people “become interdependent agents in the world, acting always with prudence, compassion and responsibility toward others.” I referred to it as “daunting.” I chose that word because the task they describe is deeply challenging. But there’s a much larger reason I find their invitation daunting: To even consider the possibility that I might help a young person develop in the ways Nash and Murray describe, I must apply their criteria to myself, and in doing so, I see again that I, too, am unfinished.

I’ll return now to the question that prompted me to start gathering my thoughts for this essay. What can I, an English teacher in Japan, do to support students in making meaning and finding their way in this world? Setting aside for the moment the big ways in which I might attempt this, I look to the small ways. To really bring this into focus, let’s say that I never have a class such as the one on the philosophy of meaning-making I mention in the introduction. In fact, let’s take it a step further and say that I will teach only basic English communication classes. In this case, what would be available to my students and me as seekers of meaning? The answer that occurs to me is this: genuine presence. There can be no somnambulism and no autopilot. There must be as much of whatever it is that makes me human in each moment. But how do I do this? This is one of the many questions I am living. For now, though, it is my hope that at times I may witness if not help to bring about moments of significance for my students simply as a matter of course.

I would like to conclude by offering an example of meaning-making brought about by a moment the genuine presence I mentioned. This took place in an art class with the instructor I mentioned previously. I needed a rectangular piece of glass for a project. I brought the glass to the studio and laid it on a table. When ready to use it, I tried to raise it from its flat position. I carefully put my fingertips on one edge and lifted. The glass broke. Through the hazy details of this incident, I remember a snippet with complete clarity. I reported to the instructor that breaking the glass was “my stupid mistake.” Her reaction was swift and oddly fierce. She told me not to speak that way about myself, not to refer to a misstep as “stupid.” It was her strength and firmness that struck me. Though she was talking to me, I felt she was giving voice to a universal guideline about self-respect. This happened more than twenty years ago. I haven’t forgotten what she said. And I never will.

References

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